

# OLGA A. MÉNDEZ

*First Puerto Rican woman elected to State Legislature*



With her 1978 election to the New York State Senate, Olga A. Méndez became the first Puerto Rican woman elected to a state legislature in the continental United States. Méndez would represent East Harlem and parts of the Bronx in the State Senate for 26 years.

Born in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, Méndez taught high

school chemistry on the island before moving to New York City in the 1950s. There, she earned a master's degree in psychology in 1960 from Columbia University and, in 1975, a Ph.D. in educational psychology from Yeshiva University.

An active volunteer, Méndez first entered politics in 1972 as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, the first of four she would attend. In 1978, Méndez, as a former Deputy Commissioner of the New York City's Agency for Child Development, won a special election to fill a vacated Senate seat. In 1984, she was elected leader of the Minority Conference in the Senate.

Méndez, who promoted legislation to fight discrimination and improve labor, housing, and education rights, was known for reaching across party lines. After switching parties to become a Republican, Méndez was defeated in her 2004 re-election bid.